Merritt Parkway, Lapham Avenue Bridge
(Bridge No. 711)
Spanning the Merritt Parkway on Connecticut
State Route 165
New Canaan
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-38

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, Lapham Avenue Bridge
(Bridge No. 711)

HAER No. CT-38

Location:	Spanning the Merritt Parkway on Connecticut State Route 15, New Canaan, Fairfield County, Connecticut UTM: 18.626430.4552540 Quad: Norwalk, South Connecticut
Date of Construction:	1937
Engineer:	George Dunkleberger
Builder:	Paul Bacco Company Stamford, Connecticut
Present Owner:	State of Connecticut Department of Transportation
Present Use:	Vehicular bridge. This bridge has no walkways designed for pedestrian use.
Significance:	This bridge is one of 25 different style bridges located along a 38-mile stretch of the Merritt Parkway that includes bridges of French, Italian, English or Classic Art Deco styles. These bridges were designed in the 1930s by the innovative bridge designer George Dunkleberger. It is an integral part of the parkway and is therefore eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.
Historian:	Keith Hall Transportation Planner Bureau of Planning Connecticut Department of Transportation Wethersfield, Connecticut July 1987
Consultant:	Dr. Frederic W. Warner Connecticut Archaeological Survey, Inc. 1615 Stanley Street New Britain, Connecticut 06050

LOCAL HISTORY

The Merritt Parkway is the product of a philosophical position prevalent in the early part of this century. Architects were busy designing public monuments - libraries, museums, parks. City planners expanded these ideas into the regional concept of parts with roadways running through them. The green belt approach, so much at odds with the congested Post Road (U.S. Route 1) environment, began to be practical in both New York and Connecticut.

The introduction of the Model T in 1908 made automobile travel available to millions of Americans and, by the end of World War I, it was apparent that the U.S. highway system was quickly becoming incapable of handling the traffic. Over 15,000,000 Model Ts along were produced by 1927 and people were beginning to drive for pleasure as much as for business. Between 1915 and 1925, the number of motor vehicles registered in Connecticut rose from 43,985 to 258,985, with no substantial changes in the road (Gombar 1980:3). By 1925, the number of accidents on state highways passed the 21,000 mark, including more than 300 fatalities.

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

The need for an improved highway system and the green belt approach to design came together in the person of Warren Creamer, the Highway Department's Chief Engineer of Projects. Working with Highway Commissioner John MacDonald, Creamer urged the construction of a new highway north of the Post Road (Gombar 1980:4-5). Several alternatives had already been considered and rejected, including a new truck route south of the Post Road before the plans were finalized. It was Creamer who envisioned a roadway built in harmony with the landscape - divided lanes, limited access built in a wide corridor screened from other development.

In 1923, a Highway Commission study was made for a route connecting New York City with New England, including a major inland route extending from the Westchester Parkways, already under consideration. By 1925, the project had picked up enough support from Governor Trumbull to include it in his recommendations to the Legislature and for several Fairfield County legislators to introduce construction legislation. Although nothing was done by that legislature, the 1927 session did pass two bills authorizing the highway and appropriating $1,000,000 for design (CHC 1975:3). It was at this stage that difficulties arose with the planning. It was found that no maps of the planned route existed and U.S. Army fliers were called in to make aerial photographs of the route (Bridge Post 10/1/37). In 1931, a commission was appointed by the governor and the first parcels of land were purchased. The project picked up momentum and, in 1933, a bond issued was authorized to pay for the highway and a toll system set up to retire the bonds. The first construction contract was awarded in 1934 and New York announced plans to connect their Hutchinson River Parkway to the Merritt, although it was not officially named that until the following year (CHC 1975:4). The highway was originally designed to take traffic from the New York State border to the Housatonic River where it would rejoin Route 1 at the Washington Bridge. Although the traffic would then be divided between Naugatuck Valley traffic and New Haven traffic, design of a new bridge over the Housatonic and extension of the parkway around New Haven and north to Massachusetts was authorized (Stamford Advocate 10/1/37). The entire 38 miles of the Merritt was opened to the public on Labor Day in 1940. During that weekend, nearly 143,000 cars used the parkway, which cut the driving time from New Haven to New York in half - four house to two.

The visual landscape along the highway was a critical part of the overall design. As the highway went through rural Fairfield County, many of the wood roads, logging trails, and footpaths were incorporated into the project as bridle paths and have been used as such since (Connecticut State Highway Commission 1947). Probably the most striking feature of the Merritt, however, is the bridge design. At the time it was built there were 35 overpasses, 25 underpasses, 6 stream bridges, and 3 railroad bridges. All of these were said to have been designed by George Dunkleberger, an architect schooled in the Henry Hobson Richardson tradition. While these bridges are of 20th century contemporary design, they reflect Richardson's concept of civic beautification. Dunkleberger represented the revival of an old American concept of civic responsibility, as he designed these bridges with sensitivity toward civic aesthetics and the environment.

Most of the bridges are of the rigid frame type, and are similar in construction. Because masonry bridges would have added ten to fifteen percent to the bridge costs, Dunkelberger used mostly concrete and iron. It is the surface treatment and ornamentation where most difference are found. In style, the bridges range from Venetian to Art Deco. There are cast iron butterflies one bridge, Pilgrims and Indians on the another. With each bridge different from the last, they make the 38-mile trip quite interesting but the cost of making each bridge different amounted to less than one percent of the total bridge cost (Summer 1937:501).

The bridge was built in 1937 by Paul Bacco Company of Stamford, Connecticut, under contract with the Connecticut Highway Department at a cost of $24,734.00. The bridge services local roads in the Talmadge Hill section of New Canaan. Most of this area is comprised of upper middle class homes set in a rural suburban setting. The following are accessible by the bridge:

South School

Saxe Junior High School

New Canaan High School

Talmadge Hill Chapel

Also serviced by this bridge is the Talmadge Hill Rail Road Station. This station is heavily used by commuters to New York City.

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Lapham Avenue Bridge was built in 1937 and carries two lanes of traffic on Lapham Avenue over the Merritt Parkway (State Route 15) in the town of New Canaan, Fairfield County, Connecticut. Like most bridges on the Merritt Parkway, it was designed by George Dunkleberger of the Connecticut Highway department. The bridge is a single span concrete rigid frame bridge with a 62' 0" centerline clearance between abutments and an overall length of 72' 6". The bridge has no skew. Under the bridge, Route 15 has two 26' wide roadway, but no center median. The abutments are an integral part of the bridge frame and the rails are open concrete. The bridge is built on hardpan and rolled gravel.

Like the rest of the Merritt Parkway, the original driving surface was concrete, but has since been paved over with asphalt. By the early 1960s, the bridge began to spall badly and a considerable amount of work was done, taking out the damaged sections and spraying new material on. Some efflorescence has reappeared. After a routine inspection noted a 1-3/8" negative camber, or deflection, in the bridge, a load restriction of 4 tons was instituted in June 1985.

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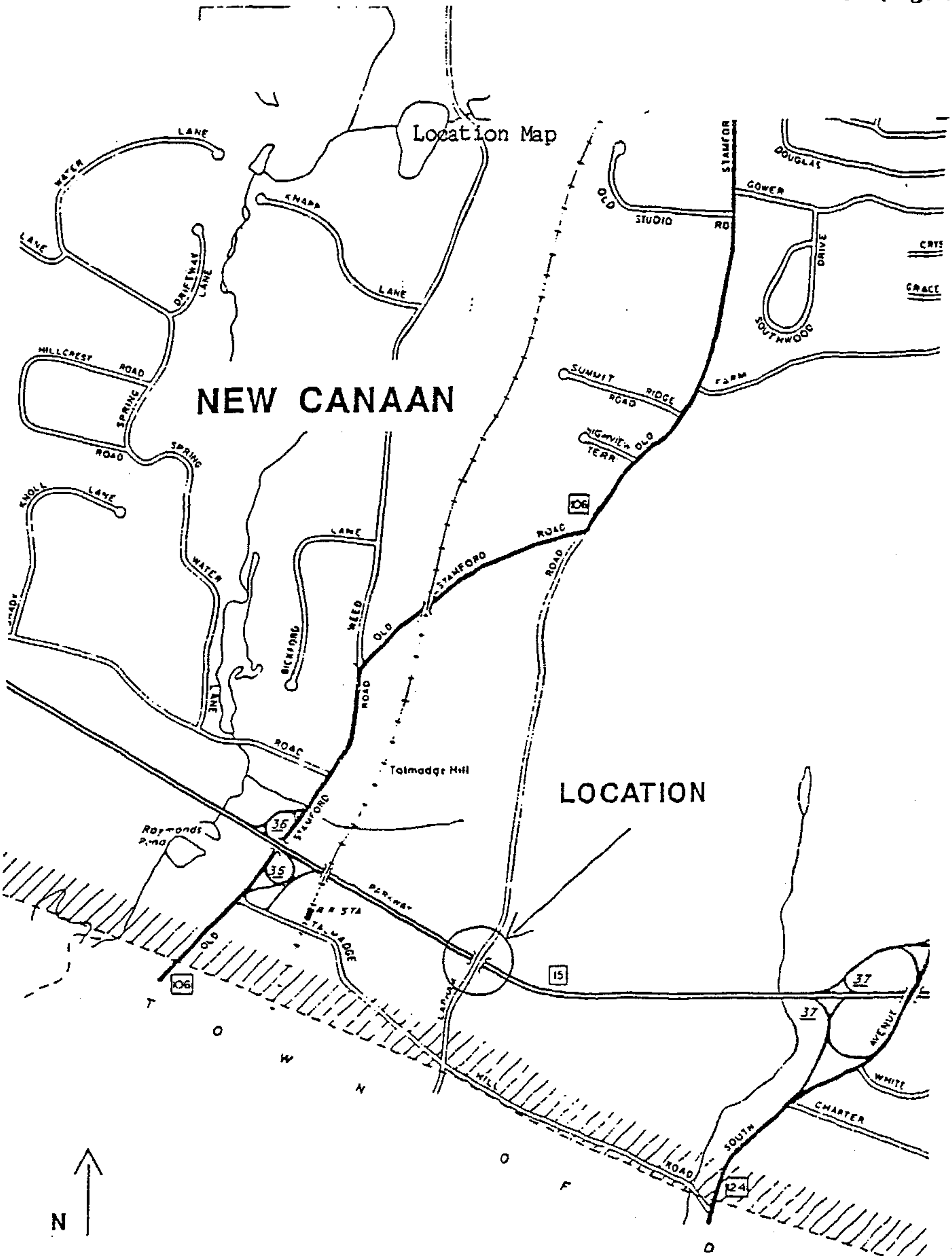
PROJECT INFORMATION

This document was undertaken in June 1987 in accordance with a memorandum of agreement among the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Federal Highway Administration. The stipulations state that the bridge will be documented to preserve a record of their present appearance in accordance with the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER).


Location Map
NEW CANAAN
LOCATION
Talmadge Hill
Raymonds Pond
WATER LANE
KNAPP LANE
DRIFTWAY LANE
HILLCREST ROAD
SPRING ROAD
KNOLL LANE
LANE
WEED ROAD
BICKFORD
OLD STAMFORD ROAD
OLD STUDIO RD
STAMFORD
DOUGLAS
GOWER
DRIVE
SOUTHWOOD
SUMMIT RIDGE ROAD
FARM
TERR.
106
35
15
37
124
PARKWAY
R R STA
TALMADGE
HILL ROAD
LAPHAM
AVENUE
WHITE
CHARTER
SOUTH
T O W N O F D A
N

Addendum to

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